

# The Use of Compañeros in Childhood Obesity Prevention

*[Announcer] This program is presented by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.*

[Latoya Simmons] Welcome to this edition of *PCD* Sound Bites. I'm your host, Latoya Simmons. Community health workers, or promotoras, are often used in Hispanic communities as a way to promote good nutrition and physical activity. The use of these mentors is particularly popular in the Hispanic community as a culturally appropriate way to promote healthy lifestyles. Today, I'm speaking by phone with one of the winners of *PCD*'s 2017 Student Research Paper Contest, Katie Arlinghaus, a doctoral student at the University of Houston. Her winning research focuses on mirroring the concept of promotoras by using high school student mentors, called *compañeros*, to effectively tailor weight management programs to reach Hispanic middle school students. We'll discuss the results of her study and what impact her research has on childhood obesity prevention and public health, particularly for the Hispanic community. Thank you for joining me, Katie.

[Katie Arlinghaus] Thanks for having me. I'm excited to talk about our study.

[Latoya Simmons] Katie, explain to listeners what *compañeros* are and how they were used in this study.

[Katie Arlinghaus] *Compañeros* are high school students who we trained to act as health mentors to middle school students. Before each class, the PE teacher would tell the *compañeros* the topic for that particular class period. *Compañeros* would participate in the PE class with the middle school students. Most of the PE classes were circuit based with different stations. It was the *compañeros* job to talk to middle school students between stations and while doing physical activity about whatever the topic of the day was. So, for example, if the topic was eating more fruits and vegetables, *compañeros* might ask middle school students about which vegetables they enjoy eating and talk about strategies to eat more fruits and vegetables. A *compañero* might say something like, "Yeah, I don't really like spinach either, but baby carrots are pretty good and they're really easy to pack for a snack. Think you could try those out?"

[Latoya Simmons] What prompted the idea for the study and what were you hoping to learn?

[Katie Arlinghaus] It's not fair, but kids are at a higher risk for obesity simply because they are Hispanic or were born into a family with limited income. My research group has developed a school-based program that has helped students from this high-risk population who have overweight or obesity lose weight. The problem is that when teachers lead the program instead of research professionals, the students aren't able to reach as good of results and their weight changes don't last. We think that schools are a great place to intervene because that's where adolescents spend the majority of their day, but research professionals can't be there all the time. If we want to improve kids' health, we need to figure out how school staff can implement programs with sustained results. Using *compañeros* could be one way for us to do this.

[Latoya Simmons] The study used a school-based obesity prevention program to reach Hispanic middle school students. What was taken into consideration when developing the program to help ensure its success?

[Katie Arlinghaus] We think that because compañeros are high school students in the same school district and from a similar home life circumstance, they're probably able to relate to middle school students in a way that PE teachers just can't. By approving of positive health choices, high school students might be able to make being healthier an easier choice for middle school students to make. For these reasons we thought that compañeros might be able to help middle school students sustain the changes that they make during the intervention period. This study tested that by comparing students who received the program with compañeros to students who received the program without compañeros.

[Latoya Simmons] What key outcomes did you examine to determine if the program was successful?

[Katie Arlinghaus] Looking at weight changes in kids is complicated. Since middle school students are still growing, we expect them to gain weight. When it comes to weight management, we're really interested in slowing their weight gain in proportion to their height. Age and gender are important factors in how we expect adolescents to grow, so to account for all of this, the primary outcome of this study was BMI standardized for age and gender.

[Latoya Simmons] Tell us about the key findings of your study.

[Katie Arlinghaus] Yeah, that's the best part. We found that students with overweight or obesity that received the intervention with compañeros had significantly better weight outcomes than those that received the intervention without the compañeros. And, most importantly, those in the compañeros group sustained their results at a year after the intervention was completed.

[Latoya Simmons] Why is it important to have tailored health programs like this for the Hispanic population?

[Katie Arlinghaus] In order for interventions to be successful at changing health behaviors, they need to be relevant to the population we're trying to reach. We know that the prevention and treatment of obesity requires lifestyle changes and that eating and physical activity behaviors have a lot to do with a person's culture. I told you earlier how Hispanic adolescents are at one of the highest risks for developing obesity, but what also makes this an important population to reach, is that Hispanics are one of the fastest growing minority populations in the United States. Our study shows that compañeros could be one way to engage this rapidly growing, high-risk group toward a healthier weight trajectory that they can sustain.

[Latoya Simmons] Thank you, Katie. You can read Katie's study online at [cdc.gov/pcd](https://cdc.gov/pcd).

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